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AUTHOR Foskett, D. J.
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ABSTRACT

The Special Library is distinguished from other libraries as being a library serving a particular group of readers, who have an existence as a group outside of their readership of the library, and whose members direct at least some of their activities towards a common purpose. Thus, the special librarian's first and major responsibility is to know just what are the purposes of the organization he serves. The special librarian must be more interested in giving information services than in collecting and preserving books for posterity. The bulk of this speech concerns the types of information services the special library should be able to give. The complete dependence on computers to produce these services is not recommended. The social and cultural fields are considered to offer the richest rewards for special librarians in developing countries. (Author/NH)

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SPECIAL LIBRARIES

by

D..J. FOSKETT,..M.A., F.L.A.

Librarian, University of London, Institute of Education

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Librarians faced with the task of defining Special Libraries are like the dog faced with the rat: it doesn't know how to define it, but it knows one when it sees one. It is a curious fact that, while other types of library - public, university, national - may exhibit striking differences from country to country, special libraries are very much the same all over the world.

The usual basis for a definition is that a special library deals with one subject, or a limited range. I do not believe that this is a very sound basis. In the first place, what is a "subject"? Is it Physics? Or Philosophy? Or Concrete Technology? However hard we try, we cannot define a subject; nor in this case, do we really know one when we see one. I suppose that Dr. S. R. Ranganathan has given more thought to this problem than anyone else, and he has finally come up with the idea of Basic Class (or Subject) as opposed to Main Class, in the traditional classification scheme; and if you examine carefully what he has said, you will realise that a Basic Class - that is, a starting subject for facet analysis - is any subject you care to name as a starting point.

This uncertainty, by the way, is by no means confined to librarians. In Education, the same sort of argument as to "what is a subject"? is going on in relation to the structure of the school curriculum.[5]

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In the second place, it is very easy to find libraries devoted to one "subject" which are clearly not special libraries. In British universities, for example, the trend nowadays is for subject groupings to mirror the faculty structure, with subject specialist librarians in charge; while many public libraries in many countries have long had "science and technology" departments, or "commercial" departments.

Long ago, I came to the conclusion that the only distinctive way to define a Special Library was that a Special Library is a library serving a particular group of readers, which has an existence as a group outside of their readership of the library, and whose members direct at least some of their activities towards a common purpose.[2] This excludes the public and university libraries, whose members pursue their own ends or do not belong to an extra-library group. It may include industrial firms, government departments, research institutes, professional associations, and so on.

This criterion, to my mind, is the only valid one at present for distinguishing Special Libraries from the others; and it follows that the Special Librarian's first and major responsibility is to know just what are the purposes of the organisation he serves. Indeed, he ought to find these out before he joins, because the very act of joining such an organisation implies acceptance of its aims. One would, I suppose, say that this applies to all librarians, but it is still difficult to find any clear formulation of the aims of

public or university libraries. In a special library, on the other hand, the question does not arise solely in respect of the library, because it only exists to further the interests of the organisation and these are usually stated clearly enough.

Such acceptance of publicly-stated aims has a special significance for the librarian: his own prosperity is bound up with the prosperity of his organisation. If it does well, he does well; if it fails, he loses his job. In these circumstances, it is natural for him to strive to do his utmost to see that his organisation does not fail. So it is not surprising that, with this best of all possible incentives, the special librarian has been the source of many important advances in the techniques of library and information science.

I introduce the word "information" here deliberately, and it is well known that there has been a lot of argument about the difference between libraries and information services, between librarians and information officers. I believe that this has been based on a misapprehension of what libraries are supposed to do in society; but it is a rather justifiable misapprehension. If we claim, as I do, that special libraries have an obligation to provide an alert, dynamic service, we can find plenty of examples of libraries where this does not happen. Even now, when special libraries have been setting the pace for half a century, we can still find librarians who would claim that their first duty is to

preserve books for posterity, and that it is an impertinence to offer assistance to experts who all know what they want and will ask for it when they want it.

So it is not surprising that when scientists just began to operate information services based on libraries, they did not want to adopt that sort of role and preferred to call themselves by another name - information officers. In many countries on the continent of Europe, you will find that scientific information officers, or information scientists, still regard themselves as allied to special librarians perhaps, but certainly separate from university and public librarians. I am glad to say that this sort of split does not seem to exist in many Commonwealth countries.

There is another reason, however, (and a much more valid one) why special libraries should be so closely linked to the idea of information services. It goes back to their origin in the research departments of industry, where the right conditions came into existence for the growth of a new era of librarianship. They arose out of several contributing factors. First, there was the growth of publication, which has now reached monstrous (and some think unnecessary) proportions. Second, there was the nature of scientific and technological research: that it is very largely based on facts - and not just facts, but recorded facts, or Public Knowledge, as Professor John Ziman calls it.[6] This means that a scientist has no objection to delegating to someone else the

responsibility of searching the literature to find the answers to his questions. If it is in the literature, then it carries a sort of guarantee of correctness, rather like the railway time-table. We believe in it.

Now these factors, though of vital importance, do not alone account for the growth of information services in industry. They exist also in other kinds of library. The third, and crucial, factor, was the need for quick results. Although this factor can be, and often has been, exaggerated, nevertheless it is true to say that, in an organisation geared to large-scale production, a speedy flow of information to the places where it is required is vital for success. No one is more conscious of this than the Managing Director; and if he needs information quickly, as he invariably does, he does not want the Research Department to tell him to come back next week. (Still less does he want to look it up in the catalogue himself.) He expects to have it in front of him, at the very moment when the need arises. This means that anticipation is the key to all information service. Not merely responding to requests, but answering them before they are asked.

Now it has become obvious why an information service has always had certain characteristics that distinguish it from other types of library. In the first place, the information officers have to know enough about the interests of their organisation to be fully aware of the sort of question the Managing Director is

likely to ask. They must know a lot about the subjects in which the organisation is interested. They must recognise, for example, that an article entitled "Radiation cross-linking mechanisms" may be useful to a polymer chemist studying the properties of polythene as a packaging material. They do not have to judge the value of the article; the chemist will prefer to do that himself. In the second place, the information officers have to develop new techniques for the speedy dissemination of information. In this, the library can perform a truly creative role; for, in addition to supplying information that fills gaps in the pattern of thought in a reader's mind, it can also provide "serendipitous" material - that is, information that the reader was not actually thinking about, and which sets him thinking along new and useful paths. Chance, as Louis Pasteur said, favours the prepared mind, and an information officer has above all to create conditions which give change the chance to do his best.

We can readily understand the sort of service that a special library ought to give if we imagine, or reflect upon, the sort of service we like to receive ourselves. Indeed, this was another aspect of the original industrial libraries - they began as collections brought by the scientists themselves to their place of work, their own books and periodicals, which they needed both for reference purposes, and for keeping up-to-date with new ideas. We know that we ourselves use our professional literature like this.

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We like to have the materials coming to us; we don't so much like having to go and fetch them. The growth of these personal collections, allied to the usual practice in industry of division of labour, led to the idea of one person, enthusiastic enough to do the job, being nominated to look after the material, and to draw the attention of his colleagues to new work in their field. Sometimes, he continued to do his own research as well; but eventually the idea of a full-time officer prevailed. The sort of work he was required to do fell into two major categories, which we now usually call current awareness service, and retrospective searching.

Current awareness service is of course a very descriptive title, which means what it says. Basically, it means that someone examines every new item that comes into the library; not simply for the purpose of cataloguing it (important though that undoubtedly is), but also with the object of finding out whether it relates directly to the interest - the current work - of any particular colleague. If it does, then either the item is sent directly to him, or he is informed that it is available in the library. The general circulation of new issues of periodicals is an example of this, and so is the sort of service common to many types of library: the publication of a list of new additions to stock.

One can envisage this service as having three characteristic forms. The first is the kind of general information list, like the Accessions List. Most special libraries find, in the sciences

in particular, that periodicals are of higher importance than books, and issue lists of periodical articles, which may either be a complete record of new issues, or a selection culled from those of general interest throughout the organisation. An important question arises here: indexes or abstracts? It is clear that an abstract is of much more use than a mere author/title entry in a list; on the other hand, abstracts are more costly and difficult to produce, and inevitably cause delays. One cannot give a generally valid answer: it depends on the circumstances. Obviously, if there are published abstracts covering the field, it would be rather foolish to duplicate them, especially where the abstracts are preceded by a fast alerting service of the kind offered by some of the great international organisations such as the Moscow VINITI, and the Chemical Abstracts Service. But if, as with Chemical Abstracts itself, the price has become so high, and the volume so large, containing much unwanted material, then clearly there may be a good case for making one's own abstracts.

A useful compromise can be effected by the practice of issuing a set of selected abstracts of recent items covering some particularly topical subject, as an individual exercise rather than as a continuing coverage. I have myself used this idea to deal with the subject of "teaching practice" in my own library.

The second form of current awareness service brings us into the area of what has become known as SDI - Selective Dissemination of

Information. This term was introduced by the late H. P. Luhn, of IBM, who applied it to selection by computer of items whose subject description (or classification) matched the descriptions given by his research colleagues of their own areas of interest. These were called their "profiles". One type of SDI service, rather more general than pinpointing particular items, is the distribution of copies of the contents pages of new issues of periodicals. "Current Contents" are available commercially from the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia, but the development of new ways of document copying have brought this service within the scope of even the smallest special library. Sending contents pages to departments, or even to individuals, may not be as good, for them, as circulating the journals themselves, but, as is well known, such circulations do not always serve the best interests of the organisation as a whole. Contents pages not only tell the users what is currently being published; they also announce the arrival of the journal in the library. The user knows that his visit will certainly be of value, and also gives himself the chance of the extra serendipitous gain. It is up to the librarian to see that this chance is not wasted.

The third characteristic form is definitely for the specialist, and may well win more friends for the library than any other. It is to counteract the well-known "Bradford scatter", on which so many wonderful mathematical expositions have been published. If, as

often happens, an article on one subject appears in a journal normally dealing with another, the specialist in the first will miss it unless someone points it out to him. The librarian scanning new items, with his colleagues' interests in mind, should be that someone. A strange journal arriving on the desk with your name against a page number, or a postcard suggesting that you might be interested in the following article in the library, tells the reader not merely about that article, but also about the librarian's devoted interest in his work.

Of retrospective searching there is perhaps less to be said, since it has been one of the principal activities of librarians ever since they invented catalogues. In spite of this, it can still come as a surprise, even to the most expert user, that librarians are able to dig out information from all manner of sources, both familiar and unfamiliar. The main tools, as we know, are indexes, catalogues, bibliographies, and all kinds of reference works, and one of the main skills of the good information officer is that he knows how to use all these. I once wrote that "flair", which many librarians held to be the highest quality for a reference librarian, was not, by itself, good enough. One needs, in my view, to develop one's own set of rules of procedure in order to arrive at an answer by the shortest possible route. Only after one has done this can one exploit to the full the luxury of flair; for flair consists, after all, of knowing when to depart from rules, and this is not

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possible unless one knows the rules first. (For the philosophically minded, there is an excellent and fascinating discussion of "Rules and routines" by the Cornell philosopher, Professor Max Black:[1] he speaks of the "intuitive transformation or condensation" of memorised rules so that the action becomes more or less automatic. In playing a game at which we excel, we do not consciously keep referring to the rules, and indeed, if we had to do so, we should not be able to excel.) Again, what seems to me to stand out as essential are, a knowledge of the subject of the search, so that one is not restricted to following the obvious trails, looking up obvious-keywords for example; and a sympathetic understanding of what goes on in a reader's mind when he starts searching for information. I tried to explore some of the psychological foundations of this in a paper to the FID/INI Conference in Rome last November.[3]

By this time, you will have noticed something very peculiar about this paper. I have been talking all the time about people; up to now, not once have I mentioned the words "computer" or "automation". You may even have been wondering when I was going to come to the point. Well, at the eleventh hour so to speak, we have reached it. The point is, that special libraries and information services exist for the benefit of people. They do not exist in order to provide work for computers and profits for computer manufacturers. A great deal of what computers have done for libraries has turned out to be disastrous.

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Having said that, I want to hurry on to disclaim any special animosity towards computers. I am in favour of any machine that will relieve me of work. But I want a machine that will do what I want, and not what it wants. To take my favourite (if that is the right word) example, the KWIC Index is a wonderfully clever thing for a computer to do, but it represents a standard of indexing that would quickly earn any human indexer a dishonourable discharge. It retreats from all the technical expertise that has been developed by generations of skilled indexers, and is accepted with acclaim! Simply because it has been done by a machine. Let us by all means make use of computers, but let us be sure that we tell them what to do, and not vice versa.

There are now, of course, plenty of examples of what machines can do if given the proper instructions. The INSPEC system of the British and American Institutes of Physics, the operations of VINITI and the American Chemical Society, and very many others, too numerous to mention, point the way forward. It is, in my view, that the proper use of automation is not for "information retrieval" in the individual library, but for the production of IR tools on the international plane. It may well be that, in time, we shall have computers, like typewriters, as familiar objects in every library. But even then, their effective use will depend on the pre-existence of large, computerised stores giving access to the international literature, not simply the collection of a single organisation.

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And furthermore, no computer in the foreseeable future at least, will be as efficient, for the purposes of consultation, consideration, browsing and reflection, as that well-tried object, the book. Dr. J. C. R. Licklider's[4] vision of the library of the future as no more than a "procognitive system" reflects the typical technocratic view - "we must do it because we can" - which will eventually destroy what we call civilised life, if we allow it.

I believe that special librarianship, in all its aspects, has particular importance for developing countries. As an integral part of the progress of knowledge, it has a special responsibility for the human and social side. Although it developed first in science and technology, and indeed has an increasingly important role to play in those fields, yet, in a developing country, I would expect the social aspects to take precedence. You have the chance to profit by the experience of the so-called advanced countries - "advanced" because the technocrats say so - their errors as much as their achievements. Science and technology are much the same in Jamaica as in England or America. It is the social and cultural fields that will provide the riches for your special librarians. Of course, you will need your scientific libraries and information services, and I do not suggest for one moment that these should be neglected. Your scientists are entitled to expect the same type of service here as anywhere else. But there is no point in setting up a new abstracting organisation in physics or chemistry for example;

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what is necessary is to provide here the facilities necessary to enable your scientists to benefit from the international systems.

On the cultural side the scene is quite different. Not only are cultural inheritances different from country to country, but the documentation systems themselves, even in advanced countries (especially, perhaps) are far behind the scientific efforts. Yet, as I have suggested already, it is in this area that man himself has most need for information. And not only information, information by itself is nothing, even if it comes from a computer. It is only when information is assimilated into a human mind that it becomes transformed into knowledge; only when knowledge is refined by experience does it become wisdom. Wisdom, far more than information, is what the nations most need today; and libraries, as the repositories of information, knowledge and experience, have a special contribution to make towards that end.

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